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Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM-2) Program

Faster and bolder: Basilan takes on increased trade

The port town of Lamitan in Basilan Province attracted the world's attention in June 2001 when approximately 50 Abu Sayyaf kidnappers, holding hostages taken from the Dos Palmas resort in Palawan, used its port and roads to escape military pursuit.

Since then, this incident has tarnished the image of the province, and frightened potential investors, thus diminishing its opportunities for economic development. These days however, Lamitan's port and roads are being put to more productive use as they support increasing trade.

"People here are so tired of Basilan being labeled as a terrorists' area. We have decided to shed the negative image and live our own lives," says Lamitan Mayor Roderick Furigay. "Like the rest of the country, we are working hard to see our province grow and develop," he adds.

USAID's Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program supports the growth and development thrust, and has recently expanded the capabilities of the Lamitan port by building a Roll-On, Roll-Off (RoRo) Ramp that serves cargo vessels. Completed in May of last year, this P25.8 million project is contributing to the growth of Basilan's trade and services sector.

"The primary beneficiaries of the port improvement project are the traders of Zamboanga and Basilan. Since its operation, truck operating costs have gone down and cargo loading in the Lamitan port is now faster and more economical," says Miguel Hiolen, GEM's Mid-Scale Infrastructure Project (MSIP) Chief Civil Engineer in Western Mindanao. A producer he knows saved around P4, 000 in shipping costs for a single shipment of cargo.

Prior to the construction of the RoRo facility, traders were forced to load and unload cargos, manually, which was a time-consuming and costly process. With the new RoRo facilities, producers are able to ship trucks —loaded with cargo—on ships and then drive the trucks directly off of the ships to deliver the cargo shortly after docking.

Basilan, together with Tawi-Tawi and Sulu, produces approximately 70 percent of the country's output of seaweed. Most of the sun-dried seaweed is brought to Zamboanga and Cebu for processing into carrageenan, a commodity in great demand by industrial, pharmaceutical and food processors.



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Basilan Province is also known for its vast coconut plantations, covering almost 12,000 hectares spread across its 45 barangays. Its agriculture sector also includes rubber farms that cover almost 1,700 hectares, coffee, corn, rice, bananas, vegetables, root crops and fruits. The agricultural output of the plantations and farm contributes to the volume of products shipped from ports such as Lamitan.

The Lamitan Port Improvement Project is one of 40 Mid-Scale Infrastructure Projects (MSIPs) to be constructed in Mindanao by GEM. These projects are designed to enhance investment opportunities and to enhance economic growth in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and other conflict-affected areas in Mindanao.

Linking farms to market centers

As another indication of its commitment to improving economic opportunities in Mindanao, GEM has recently constructed a gravel-surfaced road in Barangay Ulame, one-hour from the town of Lamitan. The new road has improved the productivity and incomes of farmers and fisherfolk, by allowing them to transport their goods to market more often and more efficiently. The rehabilitation of this 2.27 kilometer farm-to-market road was undertaken at a cost of P1.9 million.

The old earth road was often impassable to light vehicles during the rainy season, when to negotiate the road, vehicles often had to reduce their speed to 5 kilometers per hour. Access to Ulame was difficult and farmers paid P25 per sack to transport produce to the closest public market in Isabela City, the provincial capital of Basilan.

“Daan talaga ang major problem dito sa aming barangay (The road was really the major problem of our barangay),” says Sotero Fabroa, barangay chairman of Ulame.

To establish a reliable means of transporting goods to market, GEM engineers expanded the road to two lanes and upgraded it with a gravel surface and drainage structures, transforming it to an all-weather road.

Farmers and fisherfolk are now able to transport their products faster and more cheaply and transport costs have been reduced to P15 per sack. Jeepneys have also increased their average speed from to 30 kph, resulting in a savings of 22 minutes of transport time per person per trip.

In addition to the 1,000 residents of his village, Fabroa says, around 4,000 residents of the adjacent coastal villages of Tumakid and Tandung Ahas have benefited from the project. Prior to the upgrading



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of the road, the only means of transportation for people living in the interior areas was by motorcycle. Today, jeepneys can access these areas.

“Tumaas ang kita dahil maliit na ang gastos sa pamasaha (Incomes went up because the transportation costs are cheaper now,” he says. Most of the residents of Ulame are small coconut farmers who sell their products to Isabela City.

Basilan’s government officials hope that improved access to the market by the village residents will be an incentive to farmers to expand their farms and to intensify production. They predict that agricultural production in the area will increase significantly during the next five years.

“There is more drive for you to produce and earn more with the knowledge that you’re able to get your kids to school safely and bring your goods to the market faster,” says Mayor Furigay, adding that “having a good transportation system in Mindanao is essential to the peace and development in the area.”

The Ulame Road Rehabilitation is one of 800 community infrastructure projects to be constructed by USAID’s GEM Program in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. The building of bridges, the rehabilitation of roads, the construction of water systems, and boat landing facilities, as well as other types of infrastructure, are being undertaken by GEM, in collaboration with local government units and selected cooperatives, to support and to encourage the region’s economic growth. **(GEM Program)**